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ABSTRACT

Results of national studies suggest that for girls, the middle grades can be a time of significant decline in self-esteem and academic achievement. Reasons for this decline are not clearly indicated by research, but it is likely that multiple factors are involved. One factor is the preferential treatment boys receive in the classroom. Out-of-school factors include girls' observations about the different status of men and women in society. A third factor relates to cultural differences in sex role socialization. Researchers have observed other consequences associated with a general loss of self-esteem in preadolescent girls. For example, compared to boys, adolescent girls experience greater stress, are twice as likely to be depressed, and are four times as likely to attempt suicide. Girls' depression has been found to be linked to negative feelings about their bodies and appearance. In order to support and encourage preadolescent girls, parents can: (1) begin early to nurture freedom from stereotyped expectations; (2) inquire regularly about their daughters' participation in school; (3) listen to their daughters' questions and complaints about peers, siblings, and adults; and (4) be aware that girls receive conflicting messages about their worth and place in our culture. Likewise, teachers can find ways to develop gender-fair curricula; encourage girls to enroll and participate in all academic courses; and deal directly with issues of gender. School administrators can develop and enforce policies against gender-related harassment and can ensure that school programs offer equal opportunities to boys and girls. (BC)

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# Supporting Girls in Early Adolescence

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Results of national studies suggest that for girls, the middle grades can be a time of significant decline in self-esteem and academic achievement (AAUW, 1991; Backes, 1994). The analysis of the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development supports the finding that many girls seem to think well of themselves in the primary grades but suffer a severe decline in self-confidence and acceptance of body image by the age of 12 (Orenstein, 1994).

**Self-Concept and Academic Achievement**

The development of a positive self-image is critical in the middle grades. Many educators report a general decline in school performance among girls as they enter adolescence (Orenstein, 1994). As a group, for example, girls exhibit a general decline in science achievement not observed for boys, and this gender gap may be increasing (Backes, 1994). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results indicate that for 9- and 13-year-olds, gender differences in science achievement increased between 1978 and 1986, with females' academic performance declining (Mullis & Jenkins, 1988). The relationship between a decline in self-concept and a decline in achievement indicates that identifying the special needs of female students at school and at home should be a high priority for parents and teachers.

Reasons for the decline in self-esteem and the accompanying decline in academic achievement are not clearly indicated by research, but it is likely that multiple factors are involved. The AAUW study found evidence that boys receive preferential treatment in school from teachers. The researchers found that boys ask more questions, are given more detailed and constructive criticism of their work, and are treated more tolerantly than girls during outbursts of temper or resistance (AAUW, 1991; Orenstein, 1994).

Out-of-school factors probably also play a role: some observers suggest that, as they grow older, girls' observations of women's roles in society contribute to their changing opinions about what is expected of girls. If girls observe that women hold positions of less status than men in society, it may lead girls to infer that their role is less important than that of boys or that they are inferior to boys (Debold, 1995).

A third factor relates to cultural differences in sex role socialization, which are greater in some cultures than others. Parents' actions play a central role in girls' sex role socialization, and parents' choices and attitudes about toys, clothing, activities, and playmates can shape a girl's sense of herself.

It appears that ethnicity, race, and class are differentiating factors in girls' interpretation of in-school and out-of-school experiences (Brown & Gilligan, 1993). For example, the AAUW (1991) study suggests that many African American and Latina girls demonstrate evidence of a decline of self-esteem in early adolescence by becoming disaffected with schooling in general. The study by Orenstein (1994) found that in 1991, Latinas left school at a greater rate than any other group.

**Self-Image and Body Image**

Researchers have observed other consequences associated with a general loss of self-esteem in preadolescent girls in addition to a decline in actual academic achievement. They have found, for example, that, "compared to boys, adolescent girls experience greater stress, are twice as likely to be depressed, and attempt suicide four or five times as often (although boys are more likely to be successful)" (Debold, 1995, p. 23). Girls' depression has been found to be linked to negative feelings about their bodies and appearance. Poor body image and disordered eating—including obesity—is much more prevalent in adolescent girls than boys (Orenstein, 1994). While it is difficult to find specific causes for these difficulties, gender stereotypes in television, movies, books, and the toy and fashion industries pose obvious challenges to girls' healthy psychological development (Smutny, 1995).

Researchers (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; McDonald and Rogers, 1995) attribute self-image problems to the "perfect girl" or "nice girl" syndrome. According to these researchers, around the age of 10, many middle-class girls have internalized the messages and expectations they have received into the ideal of the "perfect girl" who is pretty, kind, and obedient, and never has bad thoughts or feelings. They speculate that in trying to keep up with the impossible demands of this unrealistic view of perfect feminine behavior, girls may suppress some of their ability to express anger or to assert themselves, and they may

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begin to judge themselves through others' eyes and to question their own worth. In preadolescence, girls are also struggling to reconcile their conflicting knowledge of equality and justice, and the demands for compliance placed on them at home and in school (Debold, 1995).

**Support Strategies for Preadolescent Girls**

Parents, teachers, and administrators can provide support and encouragement to preadolescent girls in several ways. According to Smutny (1995), parents can:

- Begin early to nurture freedom from stereotyped expectations. Provide toys that reflect the full range of children's play and allow girls to watch TV programs and movies that provide a balanced mix of stories with men and women characters in positive traditional and nontraditional roles;
- Encourage boys' development of nurturing and caring attributes;
- Take daughters into the workplace in their field of interest, and explain how the work contributes to the good of the community;
- Inquire regularly about their daughters' participation in school and confer with teachers about their strengths;
- Listen to their daughters' questions, complaints, and comments about peers, siblings, and adults, and make an effort to read between the lines to discover where real problems, if any, may lie;
- Be aware that girls receive conflicting messages about their worth and place in our culture from schools, television, and the movies. Counter these messages by engaging in critical discussions of these ideas and by reading and viewing age-appropriate stories and biographies with strong female characters.

Debold (1995) and Backes (1994) suggest teachers can:

- Find ways to develop gender-fair curricula for middle schools. Consider separate inservice time for male and female teachers to consider questions such as: How can I look from a girl's perspective at what and how I teach? What do I show girls through my actions in the classroom?
- Encourage girls to enroll and participate in all academic courses, especially science and math, and see that their contributions are valued in classroom discourse.
- Deal directly and age-appropriately with issues of power, gender, race, and politics, taking care to include critical perspectives on these issues in the school curriculum.

They also suggest that administrators can:

- Develop, support, and enforce policies against gender-related harassment toward girls by students and teachers.
- Take the lead in being sure that teachers and school programs offer equal opportunities to boys and girls in classrooms and extracurricular activities.
- As part of school improvement efforts, acknowledge the need to include a focus on the improvement of self-concept and achievement of girls.

**Conclusion**

At home and in school, adults can shape the lessons taught to girls about themselves, their place in school, and their future in society. Debold (1995) states, "Girls need the support of adults to resist pressures to conform to outdated stereotypes that can limit their expectations and achievement." By assuring that girls' contributions are valued in and out of the classroom, and by creating an environment in which girls can express their opinions, make mistakes, and demonstrate their interest in learning without fear of harassment or of being ignored, parents, teachers, and administrators can make a positive contribution to the development of adolescent and preadolescent girls.

**For More Information**


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